



# Providing Comprehensive Career Guidance Services through a **CAREER PATHWAYS FRAMEWORK**

**BY NATALIE STIPANOVIC**

**I**n 2005, the state of South Carolina enacted the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA). The Act, commonly known as the Personal Pathways to Success initiative, was designed to improve student achievement, graduation rates, and preparedness for postsecondary education and high-skill, high-wage jobs. EEDA is intended to work through a focus on career awareness and exploration at all school levels and the creation of locally

relevant programs of study (POS) in high schools. EEDA contains nearly all of the basic requirements of Perkins IV plus additional elements intended to support and sustain the implementation of POS. These include extra assistance for high-risk students, the organization of high school curricula around at least three career clusters per school, an enhanced role for school counselors, evidence-based high school reform, regional education centers charged with facilitating business-

education partnerships, and greater articulation between secondary and postsecondary education.

One of the timely aspects of this legislation is the prominent role that school counselors play in the career development of students. There is evidence to support the role of school counselors in providing lasting career guidance to students. For instance, research on school counseling and guidance services have found that students who receive career development





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services reported greater career awareness and higher levels of career exploration and planning. Further, long-term effects of career counseling resulted in higher levels of success in transitioning into life roles, a better sense of direction in their careers, and higher levels of overall life satisfaction (Lapan, Aoyagi, and Kayson, 2007). EEDA calls for career guidance and counseling services to be available across all grade levels and include career awareness at the

elementary school level, career exploration at the middle school level, and career preparation at the high school level. Services are applied in the context of the career cluster-based curriculum which is designed to “provide students with both strong academics and real-world problem solving skills”—South Carolina Department of Education, 2006, p. 8.

At the high school level, EEDA includes a career guidance program model that emphasizes career development and

planning during students’ ninth- and 10th-grade years, and provides students with a variety of work exploration experiences throughout high school. School counselors are required to work with students to aid them in identifying and defining their career cluster goals, the development of an individual graduation plan (IGP), and, during their 10<sup>th</sup>-grade year, the declaration of a major within a career cluster of study. EEDA goes on to specify that, “Throughout high school, students must be provided guidance activities and career awareness programs that combine counseling on career options and experiential learning with academic planning to assist students in fulfilling their individual graduation plans...”—South Carolina Department of Education, 2006, p. 8.

The Act also calls for the inclusion of career specialists who hold a Career Development Facilitator training certificate. These individuals work under the supervision of school counselors providing career awareness, career development and career exploration activities to students. The Act includes a 300 to 1 student to



guidance personnel ratio, for which both career specialists and school counselors are considered as guidance personnel. Another notable facet of the Act includes developing strategies for school counselors to involve students' parents or guardians in the career guidance process and to engage them in the development and annual renewal of student IGP's.

This legislation is timely for the field of school counseling. School counseling programs have been criticized for not providing comprehensive counseling services to students, including career counseling. This issue was recently highlighted in a study conducted by Public Agenda and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, titled "Can I Get a Little Advice Here?" The researchers of this study surveyed the opinions of 600 young adults about their high school, postsecondary and career experiences. Questions about the career and postsecondary guidance they received in high school were

included on the survey. The researchers reported that 60 percent of respondents rated their counselor as "fair" or "poor" in providing career guidance and two-thirds rated their counselor as "fair" or "poor" in helping them decide where to go for postsecondary education (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont, 2010).

One central contributor to this issue is that school counselors are not provided with the resources and time they need to provide comprehensive guidance services, because they are often required to engage in inappropriate non-counseling activities. Such activities, as outlined by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model, include: registering and scheduling all new students; administering cognitive, aptitude and achievement tests; signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent; performing disciplinary actions; teaching classes when teachers are absent; clerical record keeping; and assisting with

duties in the principal's office. Furthermore, large caseloads interfere with counselors' ability to provide appropriate counseling services to students.

## EEDA's Potential Effect on Comprehensive Guidance Services

In an effort to provide students with comprehensive guidance services, legislation like EEDA is a step in the right direction in that it aligns with aspects of the ASCA National Model by emphasizing the role of school counselors in providing comprehensive career services to all students and by restricting counselors' engagement in non-counseling activities. It also provides a framework for engagement in career counseling that is often missing in schools by centering both the counseling program and the educational curriculum focus on career pathways. The career pathways framework provides a common objective of preparing students for the appropriate pathway they need to reach their postsec-



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ondary career goals—whether their goal is a two- or four-year degree program, a training or certificate program, or to go directly to work. This alignment is an important piece to the counseling program, because it provides a context for students in developing career goals, learning about careers and engaging in work-related experiences. Further, this model aids in bridging the connection between academic curriculum and the world of work; thus, answering students' age old question, "Why do I need to know this?"

Another notable aspect of the career pathways framework is that it accentuates the need to provide students with career guidance beyond the "college or nothing" perspective. This is in contrast to traditional high school counseling approaches that have primarily focused on preparing students for college (Krei and Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei, 1996). Unfortunately, with the application of this perspective, many students have been overlooked and received little to no career guidance services.

EEDA is trying to change this approach by requiring counselors and other school personnel to provide students with information about all of their postsecondary options. Because of this, school counselors and teachers need to be aware of the postsecondary options that are available to students and be able to provide students with the resources they need to make informed career and educational decisions.

### An Evaluation of EEDA Outcomes

Currently, a comprehensive study of EEDA is under way. This study, "Programs of Study as a State Policy Mandate: A Longitudinal Study of the South Carolina Personal Pathways to Success Initiative," is being conducted by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University, in collaboration with the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE) and the University of Louisville. The purpose of this five-year longitudinal study is to

examine the effects of EEDA on the development of POS and student outcomes. This study is designed to look at three student cohorts at the secondary level, across eight sites. Each site was carefully selected based on the level of implementation of EEDA, level of community resources, school demographics, and school performance outcomes. Data for this study is being gathered using a variety of methods.

An additional qualitative study is being conducted as a component of this larger study with the purpose of examining the impact of EEDA on school counselor roles. There are four areas being explored: an examination of the effects of EEDA on school counselor roles, exploring how the implementation of EEDA has affected school counselors' caseloads, their role in providing classroom guidance and individual career counseling services, and how their work is impacted by career specialists; an examination of the effects of EEDA on school counseling program services to students, exploring the types of counseling services that school counselors are providing students; an examination of the effects of EEDA on the school counseling program's adherence to the ASCA National Model, looking at what aspects of the model that the school counseling programs are able to adhere to and where they may experience limitations; and an examination of the training needed by school counselors to provide career pathways-based guidance services, exploring the type of training they need to provide career guidance services in a career pathways educational environment.

### EEDA: An Effective Approach

Educators are continuously looking for effective approaches in reducing dropout and preparing students for success beyond high school. There is evidence that supports the role of comprehensive guidance services in promoting academic success and in helping students to make informed career decisions. EEDA's focus on a career pathways curriculum linked with

comprehensive career guidance services has the potential to provide a framework for aiding students in this task. Because EEDA is schoolwide and requires career exploration and guidance to students across all grades, there is the potential for students to be better prepared in making career and academic decisions by the time they reach high school. Further, because the guidance personnel are trained in providing both career development and comprehensive career services based on the career pathways, there is potential for students to receive the support they need to effectively engage in career exploration and academic decision-making over the course of their K-12 education. ■

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